

**Change, Motion, and Actuality in Aristotle**  
by  
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Aristotle classifies change (metabole) into three kinds: generation (genesis), corruption (phthora), and motion (kinesis). (Phys 5.1:225a33ff.) All motion is from positive to positive (id.; 5.5:229b14; 5.6:230a8ff.).

Motion is divided in turn (Phys 5.2:225b6ff.; 7.2:243a7) into three kinds: qualitative (tou poiou; kata to poion; alloiosis), quantitative (tou posou; kata to poson), and local (kata topon; phora). See also De an 2.2:413a24, b22. Quantitative motion is itself subdivided again (Phys 7.2:243a9–10; De an 1.3:406a12–3) into growth (auxesis) and shrinkage (or diminution or withering or decrease: phthisis). This explains why De anima (ibid.) speaks of four kinds of motion, rather than just three.

In an important passage in Metaphysics Theta 6:1048b18–35 (cf. Phys 3.1:201a16ff.; Eth nic 7.13:1152b28, 1153a13–7), motion is contrasted with actuality (energeia). Getting thin, learning, getting well, walking, building, coming into being [\*\*], being moved are motions; but seeing, understanding, thinking, living well, and being happy are actualities.

But it is explained in Physics 3.1 (in which the famous definition of motion comes, 201a10) that motion is after all a kind of actuality. It is neither (201b28ff.) simply a potency nor simply an actuality; but rather, a certain kind of actuality, viz., incomplete (ateles). The same view is expressed in De anima 2.5:417a16; 3.7:431a7. There are, then, two kinds of actuality: actuality proper, which is complete (teleios), and qualified, incomplete actuality, which is motion. Motion “is a sort of actuality...hard to grasp, but not incapable of existing” (201a1). Formally defined, motion is “the actuality of what exists potentially, in so far as it exists potentially” (201a10; I have altered the Oxford translation by rendering entelecheia as ‘actuality’ rather than as ‘fulfillment’).

Let us hear some modern reactions to this definition.

(1) Descartes, Rules XII (A-T 10.426=H-R 1.46): “Do not these people really seem to use magic words which have a hidden force that eludes the grasp of human apprehension? They define motion, a fact with which everyone is quite familiar, as the actualization of what exists in potentiality, insofar as it is potential. Now who understands these words? And who at the same time does not know what motion is? Will not everyone admit that those philosophers have been trying to find a knot in a bulrush? We must therefore maintain that no definitions are to be used in explaining things of this kind lest we should take what is complex in place of what is simple.”

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\* A one [two]-page handout to his Aristotle Seminar, Yale Graduate School, Fall 1958. Title and by-line added, KR D, SUNY Purchase Aristotle Seminar, Fall 1993.

\*\* This seems to have been a slip; coming into being is a case of ‘generation’, not ‘motion’; KR D.

(2) Port-Royal Logic II.xvi (tr. Baynes<sup>2</sup>, 1851, 168): “Is not the idea which nature gives us of it a hundred times more clear than this? And who is there that has ever learned from it any of the properties of motion?” (Cf. 169–70: critique of Aristotle’s definition of the soul.)

(3) Locke, Essay III.iv.8 (Fraser 2.34–5): “What more exquisite jargon could the wit of man invent, than this definition:—‘The act of a being in power, as far forth as in power;’ which would puzzle any rational man, to whom it was not already known by its famous absurdity, to guess what word it could ever be supposed to be the explication of. If Tully, asking a Dutchman what *beweeginge* was, should have received this explication in his own language, that it was ‘actus entis in potentia quatenus in potentia;’ I ask whether any one can imagine he could thereby have...guessed what idea a Dutchman ordinarily had in his mind, and would signify to another, when he used that sound?”